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Dear Mr Leivers

Monitoring visit of St Helens children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to St Helens children's services on 11 and 12 August 2020. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2019. The inspectors were Mandy Nightingale and Diane Partridge, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for the monitoring visit was in line with the ILACS framework, however, the delivery model was different. This inspection was undertaken off site and made use of information technology and video conferencing to facilitate discussions between inspectors and local authority social workers, managers and leaders. This model was agreed by the Interim Director of Children's Services and Ofsted to deliver this visit effectively while also working within national and local arrangements during the coronavirus pandemic and meeting the needs of the workforce in St Helens.

Areas covered by the visit

This first monitoring visit focused on early permanence planning, to evaluate the extent to which the full range of permanence options are achieved in a timely way for children, and the level of IROs' challenge in relation to the quality of permanence planning, to ensure that more robust oversight promotes practice effectiveness. Inspectors also focused on the impact of leaders and managers on social work practice, and the accuracy of the local authority's own evaluation of the quality of social work practice with children and families.

Inspectors considered a wide range of evidence during this monitoring visit, including electronic case records, supervision notes and other key documents provided by the local authority. In addition, inspectors spoke with a range of staff, including social workers and managers.

Overview

The local authority's focus on achieving early permanence for children and the challenge and oversight by the independent reviewing officers (IROs) are starting to lead to some positive impact on children's experiences and progress. The local authority is aware that there is more to do to achieve consistent improvements in practice that result in positive impact for all children in St Helens who require permanence.

Since the last inspection in September 2019, when the local authority services for children were judged inadequate, the council has continued to invest substantial funds into children's services. This has enabled the local authority to increase the number of social workers and social work teams, and to create a dedicated director of children's services post.

Under the leadership of the interim director of children's services and assistant director, the local authority has sustained and further developed the early changes that were made following the inspection in September 2019 and has reviewed its priorities for continued improvement.

Leaders have implemented enhanced systems and processes for quality assurance and the tracking of children who require permanence, and they have strengthened the effectiveness of oversight by IROs. These changes are starting to improve the response to most children who have recently come into care or whose families require support through pre-proceedings.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority's 'achieving permanence self-assessment', dated July 2020, is accurate and provides a good overview of leaders' understanding of the impact of services on children's experiences and progress. Leaders recognised that the initial improvement plan was not delivering the changes they envisaged and they, therefore, revised this in early 2020. The new plan provides leaders with an effective monitoring tool and supports them in measuring the impact of improved services on children's experiences and progress.

The financial investment, which increased the funding to children's services by nearly 30%, has led to increased capacity across children's services. This has helped to reduce some social workers' caseloads, giving them more time to work directly with children to understand their needs and improve their outcomes.

Quality assurance, through audit activity, has increased. A more robust moderation of case audits is now in place, but the audit methodology is too focused on compliance and processes, rather than on the quality of social work practice and its impact on the experience and progress of children. While this provides some assurance to leaders and managers about compliance with processes, audit activity is not effective enough in improving social workers' learning and practice. A revised audit methodology, which appropriately aims to improve the engagement of social workers and has a stronger focus on the quality of practice, was introduced in July 2020. It is too soon to see the impact of this.

Thorough tracking and monitoring processes for achieving early permanence are now in place, and these are helping to improve management oversight and the timeliness of securing permanence for children who have more recently come into care. Although oversight has been strengthened, there is still some inconsistency in senior management decision-making and, for some children, the right decisions are not being made to safeguard them through escalation to pre-proceedings at the earliest opportunity. Furthermore, not all decisions are uploaded to the child's electronic record or clearly recorded.

When decisions are made to manage concerns for children under the pre-proceedings' framework, or to make an application to the court for care proceedings, the newly implemented processes to support management oversight and grip are increasingly effective. Social workers told inspectors that the new framework supports them to maintain a focus on achieving early permanence for children. This aligns with the findings from this monitoring visit. The identified risks for children are regularly reviewed by first-line, middle and senior managers and this means that when the risks reduce, so does the level of intervention. For some children this has positively meant a step away from pre-proceedings work.

Letters are promptly sent to parents when a decision to enter pre-proceedings is made. These letters clearly set out the formal steps required for parents to comply with the pre-proceedings. However, the letters to parents do not clearly set out the local authority's concerns or previous interventions, so they are not advised in writing in a way that helps them to understand what this means for them and their children.

Action plans arising from the pre-proceedings meeting between the local authority and children's parents state clearly what the expectations are of parents to improve their children's circumstances and reduce risk. These are mostly aligned to the child in need or child protection plan. However, the pre-proceedings plans contain too many actions with no timescales and, therefore, parents are not provided with a clear timeframe in which to address the actions.

Leaders have appropriately reviewed the IRO role and its effectiveness in improving practice. This has enabled the local authority to set clear and achievable priorities for the next 12 months. There are early signs that the IROs' improved oversight and challenge are beginning to impact on social work practice. There is evidence of increasingly timely planning and achievement of early permanence for children newly

coming into care, particularly for younger children and those not previously known to the local authority. A greater focus on practice to improve the experiences and progress of children, rather than compliance to processes, is now being appropriately planned.

Children's looked-after review meetings take place regularly and mostly involve the relevant professionals. The child's voice is clear in most review records and, for some children, they are actively engaged in planning and leading their reviews. For most children, the options for permanence are considered in their first- and four-month review records. It is often not clear, though, what the preferred permanence option is, the legal orders being considered or the timeframe for achieving a permanence decision. This means that, for children, their families, carers and other professionals, there is not a clearly written record stating what the permanence plan is for the child.

Some children have been known to St Helens Council for a long period of time and there have been missed opportunities to take decisive action at an earlier point in time when concerns first emerged. In some cases, this is making it difficult for social workers to engage with children and families. For a small number of children, the lack of earlier intervention causes delay to securing permanence for children when the local authority's care plan for their removal from their parents' care is not agreed and endorsed by the child's guardian and the courts. Increased oversight, scrutiny of social work practice and review of children's circumstances by managers are starting to improve the quality of social work practice with children and their families. However, the pace of this improvement is not rapid enough across the service.

A strength in St Helens is that social workers know the children they work with well. Most social work practice is child-focused, with social workers engaging children in meaningful and creative direct work. Social workers have a good understanding of the risks and challenges facing children and their families. The increased prevalence of the child's voice within case records is beginning to inform care planning effectively.

Reports and minutes are written directly to children, and this means that they are given an explanation of what is being planned for them and why. However, too many of these include social work jargon and they are not written in child-friendly language.

Some children's records are not up to date or are incomplete; they do not provide a rationale for the intervention and are not always detailed enough to demonstrate good practice and planning for children. Assessments of children's needs do not all contain historical information, engage fathers and other significant males, review mothers' relationship history or provide an analysis that identifies risk and what this means for children. When children's written records do not contain enough detail, this was found to impact on managers' and leaders' ability to make informed decisions for children.

Management oversight and supervision have improved in regularity, but the quality of these does not always support social workers to make timely decisions for children. The written records of supervision contain limited evidence of a reflective discussion or a rationale for decision-making. They mostly contain information copied and pasted from other key documents, and some include actions to complete tasks that are not routinely reviewed.

This first post-inspection monitoring visit letter will not be published. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector